

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 25, 2017

The Honorable Phil Roe
Chairman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Tim Walz
Ranking Member
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
333 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz:

I am writing to request that the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hold a hearing on the use of burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan and the potential health risks they pose to our military personnel.

Our men and women who were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan were exposed to hazardous chemicals as a result of the persistent use of burn pits in the early years of the wars. The Department of Defense (DoD) has reported that there were 63 burn pit sites in Iraq, and an additional 197 in Afghanistan.¹ Exposure to burn pits was common, as they were used to discard waste at military sites. These burn pits incinerated all types of waste products, including chemicals, paint, medical and human waste, munitions, petroleum products, and plastics.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and DoD have commissioned several studies examining the adverse effects of exposure to burn pits. One of the most notable studies, conducted by the Institute of Medicine in 2011, found evidence of a link between exposure to combustion products and reduced lung function.² Additional studies, from the Millennium Cohort Study and the National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans, among others, are determining the long-term health effects from exposure to burn pits.

¹ DoD (Department of Defense). 2011. Exposure to toxins produced by burn pits: Congressional data request and studies. In Memorandum for the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs. Washington, DC: Department of Defense.

² Long-Term Health Consequences of Exposure to Burn Pits in Iraq and Afghanistan.
<https://www.nap.edu/read/13209/chapter/1#ii>

While the VA has acknowledged that toxins found in the smoke from burn pits can affect the eyes, skin, respiratory and cardiovascular systems, and other internal organs, the Department continues to assert that these symptoms are temporary and that there is not enough medical or scientific information to attribute these issues to long-term exposure to burn pits.

In 2014, the VA created the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry to help researchers study the health effects of burn pits and other airborne hazards. The registry, which is voluntary, has more than 115,000 participants. However, the VA estimates that there are more than 3 million veterans and service members eligible to participate. Additionally, a recently released National Academy of Sciences report concludes that the registry is “fundamentally unsuitable for addressing whether burn pit exposures have caused health problems,” due to its reliance on voluntary participation and self-reported information.³

The time has come for Congress to hear about the health costs of exposure to burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan. Congress has the responsibility to ensure that our veterans and service members receive the care and services they require. This matter deserves our attention and a hearing will assist with raising much-needed awareness.

Thank you for your swift attention to this important issue.

Respectfully,



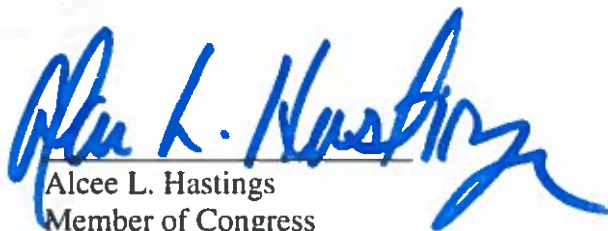
Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



Joyce Beatty
Member of Congress



Ryan A. Costello
Member of Congress



Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

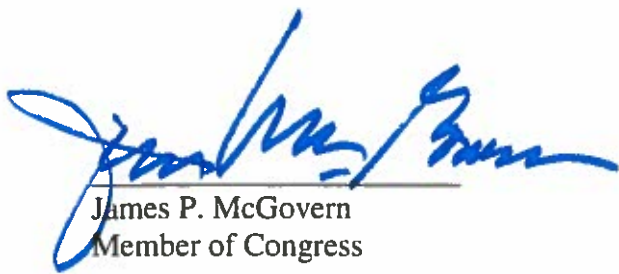


Walter B. Jones
Member of Congress



Peter T. King
Member of Congress

³ Assessment of the Department of Veterans Affairs Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry. 2017.
<http://www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/~/media/Files/Report%20Files/2017/Burn-Pits-highlights.pdf>



James P. McGovern
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